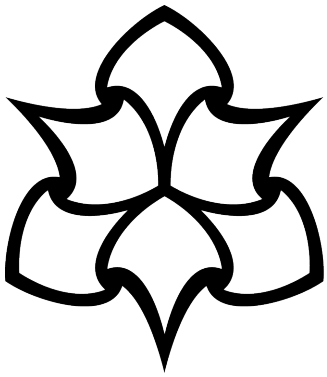

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# Performing Hybridity or Deflecting Islamophobia? Adaptable Identity Management amongst Young British Pakistani Muslims

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**Abstract:** This article engages with issues of identity construction and maintenance as expressed by a group of young British Pakistanis living in the North-West of England. Drawing on primary data from a qualitative study, we examine the ways in which Muslim identities are maintained, negotiated, and protected in relation to everyday situated cultural experiences. Nested within a context in which Islamophobia is pervasive, we discuss four salient processes of identity management articulated by participants: cherry picking; strategic adaption; ambassadorship and active resistance. Whilst these processes are to be considered as porous rather than mutually exclusive, our analysis elucidates evidence of both nimble and creative individual identity management and also an entrenchment of collective pride. We posit that, for the participants in this study, such practices constitute a grounded, pragmatic response to living in an environment in which their religious beliefs, political values and cultural commitments are frequently questioned within public life, the media and the political sphere.

**Keywords:** agency; hybridity; identity; Islamophobia; resistance; young Muslims



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## 1. Introduction

Presenting data from an empirical study conducted in the North-West of England, this article focuses on the diverse ways in which young British Pakistani Muslims conceive, maintain and negotiate their identities. We begin by discussing the underlying factors which have fostered a cultural climate of suspicion towards Muslims in Britain, highlighting the catalytic role of longstanding media and political discourses in rendering Islam as 'other' and Muslims as 'risky'. We go on to consider the sociostructural factors which have, in various ways, influenced the lives of participants, before delineating our methodological approach. Our key findings are presented with recourse to four salient processes emergent during data analysis. First, we discuss practices of cherry picking, through which individuals selectively adopt and deploy particular cultural products and artefacts to configure multi-faceted hybridic identities. Second, we elucidate examples of strategic adaption, a form of impression management which permits the contextual modification of display and behaviour. Third, we illuminate the process of ambassadorship, during which instances of ignorance about Islam and/or Muslims are countered via reasoned argument. Fourth, we recount episodes of active resistance: a mode of facing-off conflict in situations of direct hostility. Our primary objective is to amplify the voices of the young people who partook in this study and to illumine the ways in which participants indexed everyday lived experiences to identities, both individually and collectively. Whilst it may be tempting to interpret the reflections of participants with recourse to extant frameworks, we elect not to 'read' the data through a singular sociological lens. Rather, our trajectory is oriented towards developing understandings of the cultural conditions in which young British Muslims live and the ways in which they actively shape their lives and identities

through embedded routinised strategies. Nonetheless, in elucidating various processes of identity construction and maintenance adopted by participants, we highlight intersections, resonances and divergences with classical sociocultural concepts previously developed by Bhabha (1994); Goffman (1959), respectively.

There are further caveats to make in relation to the discussion that follows. First, it is important to stress that the processes and practices elaborated below are not specific to the individual. That is to say, the participants in this study cannot meaningfully be categorised into 'types' nor 'personalities', predisposed to exhibit one or another set of identity choices or behaviours. Rather, different responses were mobilised by participants at different junctures, underscoring the fluid nature of identity management (see Mythen 2012; Ghorashi 2017; Pilkington and Acik 2020). Second, and following on from this, we intend to convey the fundamentally ambivalent nature of the processes discussed for participants. As will be expounded, both strategic adaption and resistance are largely protective and defensive modes of identity management, whereas ambassadorship and cherry picking offer creative opportunities for autonomous expression. These strategies and dramaturgical displays are 'productive' in the broadest sense in that they simultaneously allow the possibility of circumventing precarious interactions, countering misperceptions and also positively affirming identity. Nonetheless, as participants' testimonies indicate, incessant demands to adapt and switch between modes of self-representation—allied to underlying pressure to respond to misperceptions about faith, outlook and cultural rituals—can also prove taxing and disruptive in specific social milieu. Before unpacking the methodology and discussing our findings, we offer a capsule account of the broader context in which the experiences shared by participants must be situated.

## 2. Setting the Context: Exclusion, Stereotyping and Islamophobia

The term Islamophobia has undergone an evolution in academia (Al-Azami 2021). It was first defined by the Runnymede Trust as 'dread or hatred of Islam' and, therefore, a 'fear or dislike of all or most Muslims' (Runnymede Trust 1997, p. 1). The trust revisited its position twenty years later, to conclude that Islamophobia is a complex social process akin to a type of cultural racism (see Runnymede Trust 2017). This position also taken up by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims who note, 'Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness' (2018, p. 1). This paper aligns with the APPG's definition which was derived through extensive consultation with community and expert stakeholders, led by a cross-party political group and endorsed across the political spectrum and multiple sectors. Al-Azami (2021) notes, the APPG's definition has been endorsed by two of the three major political parties in England and all political parties in Scotland, many public bodies and civil society organisations, numerous British academics who research Muslims and Islam in Britain, and the largest and most influential of Muslim umbrella organisation, the Muslim Council of Britain. Despite this growing accord, the current government is notable in its resistance to the APPGs definition on the grounds that it would hinder free speech and counterterrorism efforts. Regarding the latter, Martin Hewitt, chairman of the National Police Chiefs Council and Assistant Commissioner, Neil Basu have both expressed confidence that the APPG's definition would not impede security efforts (Merrick 2020).

While the definition of Islamophobia is in flux, the available evidence shows Muslim Britons suffer deep and wide-ranging concrete social disadvantages in relation to social exclusion, violence, economic marginalisation, prejudice and discrimination (see Abbas 2019a; Allen 2020; Runnymede Trust 1997). Longstanding political and media discourses endorsing the view that multiculturalism in Britain has 'failed' have frequently been indexed to the idea that Muslim minority groups have struggled to integrate into British society (see Casey 2016). Shifts in the socioeconomic landscape in Britain, including, inter alia, financial crisis, austerity measures, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic have created favorable conditions for a rise in the vocality and popularity of far right-wing movements in the UK (see Dodd 2020; Pilkington 2016; Winlow et al. 2017). While such movements

may differ considerably in relation to their take on economic and social policies, they are broadly united in their strident objections to Muslim minority rights (Godmin 2020). Fueling a context of hostility for British Muslims, the current British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has previously publicly articulated disparaging comments about Muslim culture and problematised Islamic heritage, suggesting that Muslim women wearing the Burqa resembled 'letter-boxes' and 'bank robbers' (see Allen 2020; Tell MAMA 2019). More recently, the Prime Minister's appointment of William Shawcross as Independent Reviewer of the Prevent counterterrorism strategy has caused widespread consternation, given his previous Directorship of a neoconservative thinktank and, moreover, a history of making negative remarks about Islam (see Grierson and Dodd 2021). Within the mainstream media, the values and beliefs of British Muslims are frequently challenged and undermined. This is allied to an ingrained process of cultural stereotyping which positions Muslims in negative subject roles-from 'home-grown terrorists', to 'jihadi brides' and 'foreign fighters' (see Abbas 2019b; Khan and Mythen 2019). In addition to being ideationally under siege, Muslims are subject to both organised and sporadic racist violence. Statistics documenting recorded Islamophobic attacks against Muslims are sobering. A report published by the charity Tell MAMA (2019) recorded 1330 reports of Islamophobic abuse in 2017, with clear spikes in frequency after the terrorist attacks in Manchester and London. The numbers reported the preceding year—1070 recorded incidents—remain deeply troubling (Tell MAMA 2019). While racism has historically been a persistent problem in Britain, antagonism towards Islam and discrimination against Muslims have intensified over the last four decades (see Abbas 2019a; Allen 2020; Kundnani 2014). As Modood (2018) posits, the social contexts in which anti-Muslim sentiment is vectored appear to be broadening as the prevalence of Islamophobia rises.

In the post-Second World War period, the British government encouraged migration of Pakistani male workers to meet labour shortages in the economically declining industrial cities of the South-East, the Midlands and the North-West (Shankley et al. 2020). British-born and colonial-born subjects legally had equal rights under The British Nationality Act 1948. Nonetheless, Pakistani citizen-migrants, frequently faced antagonism and racism as they settled in the UK (see McLoughlin 2010; Shankley et al. 2020). It was only arguably during the Salman Rushdie Affair in 1989 that sections of the British Pakistani community elected to abandon the role of silent, obedient minority and mobilised collectively as Muslims to defend religion and honour (see McLoughlin 2010; Werbner 2004). Community concerns that Rushdie's retelling of the origins of Islam were provocative were represented in the mass media as evidence of religious fanaticism (see Hussain and Bagguley 2012; Meer et al. 2010). Public scrutiny around issues of 'integration' and 'assimilation' during the Rushdie Affair initiated an evolution in ascribed identity, from 'Asian' to 'Muslim' for British Pakistanis. Successive national and international events and the perpetual discursive framing of Muslims as problematic, have historically affected the way in which Muslim identities have developed. Muslim identities, like those of other minority ethnic groups, have long been expressed in relation to, and as resistance against, racialised exclusionary discourses (see Dwyer 1999). Following Ahmad and Evergeti (2010), we can identify a symbiotic process at play between the discursive imposition of 'Muslim' as a master identity over Britain's ethnically and denominationally diverse Muslim populations and the reactive forging of 'Muslim' identifications as a form of agentic pride and political mobilisation (see Abbas 2015; Modood 2005).

Although British Muslims were first systematically singled out as a problematic group during the Rushdie Affair, the disturbances which occurred in mill towns in the North of England in 2001 served as a watershed, after which British Muslims became widely depicted as threatening the fabric of British society (see Kundnani 2015). While this historical backdrop is important, the representation of Muslims as dangerous in the media and popular culture has since gathered momentum (Khan and Mythen 2019; Meer and Modood 2019). Wide-ranging research indicates that British Muslims experienced heightened levels of hostility and abuse in the public sphere in the years post-9/11, exacerbated

by the terrorist attacks that followed in London and Manchester (Allen 2020; Anwar and Hussain 2012; Mythen et al. 2009; Pilkington and Acik 2020). Anti-Muslim sentiment has manifested in various ways, including distorted political discourses problematising Muslims as a threat to national security (Mythen and Walklate 2015), disproportionate forms of policing and surveillance (Nabulsi 2017) and unwarranted referral of Muslims to Prevent counter-radicalisation panels (Qurashi 2018). These problematic institutional policies have materialised alongside steep rises in racially motivated hate crimes (see Burnett 2016; Casciani 2018) and widespread reporting of routine forms of harassment, exclusion and victimisation experienced by Muslims in public spaces (Dunn and Hopkins 2016; Mythen et al. 2013). Aside from documenting specific forms of prejudice against Muslims, there is a wealth of literature recording the pernicious and deleterious impacts of Islamophobia (Abbas 2020; Allen 2020; Kundnani 2015). As Ansari and Hafez (2012) note, the far-right view that Islam fundamentally conflicts with modern Western values has recursively seeped into mainstream Conservative party-political discourse in Britain, impacting both immigration and community cohesion policies. Politicians from across the spectrum have voiced concerns about the failure of Muslims to embrace 'British values' and controls specifically targeted to limit migration by Muslims have been enforced. Indeed, the pervasiveness of anti-Islamic ideology and the extent to which anti-Muslim sentiments have become normalised led Baroness Warsi (2011) to assert a decade ago that 'Islamophobia has now crossed the threshold of middle-class respectability . . . it has passed the dinner party test'. A central ideological plank of Islamophobic discourse is the so-called 'irreconcilability thesis', which suggests that Islam is intrinsically opposed to Western ideals (Huntingdon 1997). Such injudicious views fuel anti-Islamic discourses, creating an unsettling environment for young Muslims in which maintaining a settled sense of identity can be challenging (see Mythen 2012; McDonald 2019). The presentation of British Muslims in media and popular culture as 'risky' and an 'enemy within' has reinforced negative cultural stereotypes held by those antagonistic towards Muslims. Discourses perpetuated in popular right-wing media outlets that British Muslims are especially prone to radicalisation has served only to escalate tensions. Through the operationalisation of a panoply of surveillant practices-coupled to dominant media and political discourses-British Muslims have become 'securitised' over the last two decades (see Hussain and Bagguley 2012; Qurashi 2018). As our data illustrate, it is misleading to suggest that this securitised context is all encompassing in shaping the experiences of young British Muslims. Nevertheless, a general climate of suspicion directed towards Muslims engenders distinct challenges and, as we shall elaborate, renders intensive identity management techniques necessitous.

## 3. Methods

The qualitative study reported on below was designed to gather insights into identity construction and management amongst a group of young British Pakistani Muslims, aged between 18 and 26. The first phase of data collection involved thirty-two participants contributing to four focus groups, each with equal gender representation. Open questions—intended to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences—were formulated to serve as a compass for focus group discussion. The second phase comprised twelve in-depth interviews, selected from the participant pool and again gender balanced. Participants were recruited initially through contacts and gatekeepers within the Muslim community and, thereafter, through snowball sampling. Focus groups were used to capture interactive discussions to gather knowledge of attitudes, beliefs, practices, life events and collective identity narratives. Focus groups served to highlight group norms and processes and to illuminate the social, cultural and institutional contexts in which individual agency takes place. Intra-group dialogue generated in a supportive focus group environment can provide multiple layers of meaning, including convergence and divergence in attitudes and behaviour that may remain untapped during solitary interactions with researchers (see Litosseliti 2003; Morgan 1997). Methodological utility aside, focus groups enable exploration of the life-worlds of socially marginalised groups, particularly in circumstances

in which participants are able to share their experiences of 'concrete' situations (Morgan 1997). Intensive group dialogue can itself be transformational, raising consciousness of power relationships and allowing supportive sharing of the impacts of inequality (Johnson 1996). In our view, the deep discussions that arose during focus groups signalled that participants were keen to share a platform to express their experiences and viewpoints. The second semi-structured interview phase permitted further exploration of issues raised in the focus groups, with individual accounts of social experiences being further excavated (see King and Horrocks 2010). Semi-structured interviews were deployed to elicit 'thick description' of identity management techniques, enabling contextual detail and specificity (see Geertz 1973). All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and participants were attributed pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. The principles of grounded theory were followed during the research process in order to approach the data from the 'bottom up' (see Strauss and Corbin 1990). Grounded theory facilitates methodical gathering of information from participants and enables dynamic data analysis (see Ralph et al. 2015). Rather than adhering to a pre-determined theoretical framework, it was our intention to design this study in an open fashion to facilitate novel and creative conceptual development. In line with grounded theory, axial encoding was conducted after the first and second phases of research, permitting iterative analysis and cross-referral. Initial codes were attached to the raw data using Nvivo qualitative research software and were subsequently clustered together into broader categories to identify recurrent patterns. Following consistency cross-checks between the researchers, a definitive set of processes of identity construction and management were derived. While non-generalisable, these processes do represent embedded patterns of behaviour articulated and shared by participants.

The community's major growth, however, dates from the post-Second World War immigration of Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Indians to fill specific labour demands in declining industrial cities in the South-East, the Midlands, and the North.

## 4. Discussion

### *4.1. Identities in Motion: Cultivation, Negotiation and Resistance*

Celebrating Hybridity: Cherry Picking

We begin our analysis by unpacking arguably the most affirmative process of identity building, which we have dubbed 'cherry picking'. During focus groups and interviews, participants spoke enthusiastically about being able to actively adopt and blend practices and products from their familial cultures of origin. Not only were the benefits of being able to access facets of British/Pakistani traditions highlighted—for example, in terms of fashion, music, film and cuisine—participants also described the way in which this enabled them to assume a unique cultural vantage point. Having a privileged entrée to two heritages—considered in part distinct, but correspondingly rich—was a common topic of discussion. Whilst globalisation and Muslim diaspora renders the drawing of distinctions between 'Islamic' and 'Western' traditions somewhat outmoded, our participants nonetheless commonly chose to frame their cultural choices and experiences through contrasting facets of their dual-heritage identities. Disputing the specious claims associated with Huntingdon's (1997) much maligned irreconcilability thesis, the experiences and perspectives of our participants illustrate that claims regarding incompatibility are erroneous. Highlighting the progressive possibilities of being able to draw across cultures, our participants articulated an 'and' rather than an 'either/or' approach to their identity choices, as the following exchanges demonstrate:

Hanna: 'I think you can still be a good Muslim and appreciate the benefits of living in Britain. You can appreciate both cultures. Like you can wear Western style clothes, but still wear the hijab. Living here you get the best of both worlds'.

Hanna's views are consistent with the findings of cognate studies involving young British-born Muslims (see Zempi 2016; Werbner 2011). Veiling is asserted by Hanna as an identity choice, rather than an immutable practice. In signalling personal devotion to

Islam and pride in a dual-heritage identity, Hanna sees no contradiction in being Muslim and British. Her reference to the 'best of both world's' chimes with Homi Bhabha's (1994) third space thesis, with progressive aspects of cultural intermingling being accented. The positive possibilities of cultural fusion identified by Hanna were also reinforced by Yasmin:

Yasmin: 'I've got to say I love our clothes, and all the Western stuff as well. I mean, I wouldn't want to live the rest of my life wearing one or the other . . . you can wake up and go to college channelling Gigi Hadid, but when I get married it'll be full on Mughal bride with lengha, jewellery, embroidery, mehndi. No white dress for me'.

Echoing Hanna's view, Yasmin's response typifies appreciation of the immediacy of access to an array of sartorial choices, selected to cultivate hybridised British Muslim identities. In a similar vein, Homi Bhabha (1994) discusses the progressive potential of assuming 'in-between' or 'interstitial' identities which enable individuals to flit between subject positions and cultures, facilitating a 'third way' of seeing, representing and knowing. Extending Hanna and Yasmin's observations, Aroos describes the liberating aspects of cultural mixity and personal choice:

Aroos: 'We've got access to literally everything. For our generation, it's literally win-win. If you want Muslim modesty wear, seriously, get it next-day delivery from ASOS or nip to the high-street and get a tunic-trouser co-ord and you're ready to pray, whatever. Honestly, I got all my Umrah clothes from normal shops. You don't have to go to the material shop, go for a fitting and get it sewn up like our mums. None of that faff. But if you want to rock a boiler suit and get shisha down the strip [local milieu] no-one will bat an eyelid. Actually, they'll be there doing it with you (laughs) . . . nobody cares anymore, you can just do what you want, have a bit of everything'.

While these findings are consistent with previous studies of Muslim youth (see Abbas 2015; Herding 2014; Mir 2011), they diverge from conceptions of hybridity that locate culture as the defining element of identity. Aroos' narrative aligns with Anthias' concept of 'translocational positionality' (Anthias 2001, p. 619), a critique of 'old ethnicities' that centre culture in the narration of identity and 'otherness,' at the expense of a range of intersecting issues related to hybridity. While Anthias' framework relies on an intersectional perspective, it rejects static group categories that intersect, instead offering identity positions as locations that are contextually contingent, allowing the possibility of conflict, contradictions and fluidity between subject positions. Aroos' account aligns with these principles. While access to the array of fashion choices she describes is rooted in the cultural third space, those choices express a range of intersecting positions including gender, religion and modes of consumption. In this way, the texture and range of Aroos' British Muslim identity cannot be fully understood from within cultural and religious boundaries alone. Torrekens et al. (2021) demonstrated strongly identifying as Muslim is not experienced as exclusive of other identifications claimed simultaneously and this phenomenon that has long been documented in the literature. Abu-Lughod (2002) identified merging practices amongst Islamic, Christian and Jewish religious communities, who engage in integration of holy texts and traditions with modern practices and ideals. More recently, Janmohamed (2016, p. 3) coined 'generation M' to encapsulates how young Muslims uphold religious traditions while asserting multi-vocal identities and contemporary lifestyle choices.

### *4.2. Adjusting to Context: Strategic Adaption*

While opportunities to 'cherry pick' were roundly valued by participants and illustrate the benefits of cultural diversity, strategic adaption describes a more ambivalent mode of identity management, encapsulating techniques of public presentation primarily designed to maintain equilibrium and minimise conflict. These practices elicit parallels with Bhabha's notion of 'mimicry' (Bhabha 1994, p. 125), through which individuals adopt mirroring strategies to 'fit in'. While mimicry is grounded by power relations, it nonetheless constitutes a transformatory act, whereby the 'other' is a point of difference that is 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha 1994, p. 126). In this way, mimicry involves a 'double articulation', through which the other is appropriated for power as (s)he visualises it (see

Rutherford 1990). Despite the potential similarities, there are also differences to be noted between the concepts of strategic adaption and mimicry. Whilst the latter can be understood as an act of simultaneous mirroring and transformation, the former constitutes a more calculated mode of social positioning. Through strategic adaption, an individual may decide to actively blend in through speech or behaviour; they may deploy a considered silence, or indeed consciously omit certain facts or beliefs in order to avoid potential distress and disequilibrium arising from discrepancies between social context and performed identity (Marcussen 2006). Our data illumine various ways in which participants employed such methods, not so much as a form of mimicry, but more as a projected performance of being the 'same' as non-Muslims, consciously deflecting attention from what may otherwise be perceived as 'differences'. For our participants, strategic adaption took two primary forms: first, that facilitating transitions between different social situations and, second, as a technique of conflict avoidance. These forms underline the fluidity of identities and are indicative of shifting identity performances that align with intersecting subject positions (see Anthias 2001; Eisen 2019; Hamid 2018; Mir 2011). Inviting further comparison with Goffman's (1959) symbolic interactionism, participants described a process of presenting different 'faces' to align with cultural context. Strategic adaption thus incorporates dramaturgical behaviours that involve modifying actions to suit the environment, such as making selective sartorial and language choices according to place. In discussions around identity, embodiment and identification of Islam in speech and action were frequently alluded to. Here, Maryam describes adopting adaptive tactics to enhance 'Muslimness' in the domestic sphere and 'non-Muslimness' in the public sphere:

Maryam: 'It's like when I was younger. I'd be out with all my friends, English friends as well, and you'd be having a laugh all the time-meeting boys, going to clubs-and then you'd go home and be a completely different person. You'd play the dutiful daughter, all demure and proper, and your parents wouldn't have a clue about what you were getting up to! To be honest, it's still a bit like that [laughs]. There are still things we don't talk about, even now'.

Maryam's comments suggest that she does not consider aspects of her identity as necessarily correspondent, but nor are they perceived as jarring. To run with Goffman's metaphor, Maryam chooses the 'mask' (Goffman 1959, p. 19) deemed to be most appropriate to fit the situation. As Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013, p. 101) note, individuals are able to 'bring forth certain aspects of the self in interaction while simultaneously marginalising others. The individual is not becoming somebody else when s/he does this, but rather both the mask worn and the person behind it are facets of the same individual'. Mask wearing is crucial for individuals managing complex hybridised identities. Attempting to meticulously reconcile multiple facets of identity may result in a fractured sense of self and destabilisation of ontological security. Thus, in certain cultural contexts, participants described a process of acceding to what Mir (2007, p. 81) describes as 'majority practices'. Like Maryam, several female participants reported experiencing sartorial expectations regarding the wearing of traditional dress. To illustrate the importance of switching 'masks' in sustaining a coherent identity, we can consider Zaineb's use of the hijab to (de)emphasize her Muslim identity. While her parents believe wearing the hijab is a core Islamic requirement, for Zaineb this was incongruent with her lifestyle and cultural interactions. To maintain both 'faces', Zaineb has created what might describe as portable Islam, typified by carrying the hijab in her handbag, to don or remove as context dictates. Wearing the veil for Zaineb is thus a flexible rather than a fixed part of her British Muslim identity.

Zaineb: 'It's like wearing the hijab. No one really forces me to. I just do it to please my parents really. Don't get me wrong, I love wearing it sometimes, like at weddings, or at Eid, but I don't want to wear it all the time. Loads of girls I know hardly ever wear it, but my parents think it's disrespectful. So, I just end up taking it off when I'm at college or out with friends and putting it back on before I get near home'.

Vectoring adaptive qualities, many participants reported selecting the most appropriate 'face' or 'mask' for the setting, changing aspects of their language, clothes or behaviour

to project a preferred image. In Goffman's (1959, p. 23) terms, this might constitute selecting the right 'props' to achieve the desired outcomes of self-presentation. The intricate processes of self-evaluation and identity negotiation recounted by our participants were pre-dominantly self-affirming. Nevertheless, while managing a malleable identity may be partly enabling, it requires constant effort, energy and foresight. Simply celebrating the creative aspects of hybridised identities amongst our participants would be myopic and elides the emotional impacts of spatial and temporal 'face changes'. Whereas the experiences of female participants illuminate how gender intersects with the specific challenges of being British and Muslim, ubiquitous discomfort emerged around the public besmirching of Islam, as Yasmin and Muhammad-Ali illustrate:

Yasmin: 'I'm always finding myself in those positions. You know, where someone's saying something against Muslims or putting down Islam. Half the time they've not even registered I'm Muslim. Even though you totally disagree with them you just stay quiet. Or you change the subject because you can't be bothered getting into another argument. Otherwise they just think you're a fundamentalist nutter and try everything they can to avoid you'.

Muhammad-Ali: 'Like this shop I used to work in, the manager was a right idiot. Always questioning me about being Muslim, always making really stupid comments. She'd try to get me to talk about it. Anyway, one day these two Muslim girls came in, one of them wearing a hijab, and she said to me after they'd left: "what are they doing shopping here?" and started slagging them off for coming in. I couldn't believe she said it, to me, a Muslim! What could I do, though? She was my manager. So I just had to shut it out and try to ignore what she was saying. Thing was, I didn't want her thinking I was agreeing with her'.

In these reflections, Yasmin and Muhammad-Ali articulate some of the dilemmas that emerge as a consequence of adopting practices of strategic adaption to avert the non-Muslim, racialised gaze. They are illustrative of situations in which fundamental ideological beliefs are subdued to avoid tension and conflict. Yasmin avoids being drawn into expressing her personal beliefs for fear of being labelled an extremist. Although Muhammad-Ali is enraged by the Islamophobic comments of his manager, in order to prevent escalation and potential damage to his career, he employs a considered silence. Whilst understandable, such forms of conflict minimisation and deflection are not bereft of psychological and ontological consequences. To this end, participants spoke of the unsettling nature of compromising or 'hiding' their beliefs, of not 'being themselves' and feeling compelled 'to walk away'. By opting to self-censor rather than directly oppose the misguided views of others, disruption can be avoided in public, but not without triggering internal disquiet. Practices of strategic adaption may serve as protective factors, yet avoiding external conflict can propagate internal feelings of frustration:

Khadija: 'We all do it. You feel so angry at what people are saying sometimes, but you know you can't really say what you want to say. You just have to keep it inside, when really all you want to do is scream at them. But I don't. And then I feel like a loser. Like I had a small opportunity to defend Islam and I let someone trample on it. Then I'm angry with myself and angry with them for putting me in that position'.

Aisha: 'I just get so angry sometimes. I can't talk to some people. They do your head in. I just have to walk away because if I stay, if I start talking to them, I'll just go OTT on them. I mean it man, I'll freak out on them. And you can't do that all the time like a psycho hijabi. They'll put me in an asylum. Last time that happened was when Emily said the Middle East needed saving by America and isn't it good that we have the American police to keep everyone in order. Oh my God, I just couldn't hold it in. I lost the plot. I haven't seen Emily again. I think she was shocked. I think I took all my frustration out on her. She thinks I'm the devil now'.

Again chiming with Goffman's (1959) symbolic interactionism, participants discussed various identity management strategies used to resist labelling and reject stigma. Nevertheless, being directly exposed to prejudice was understandably hurtful for participants,

provoking 'fight or flight' decisions. Both Khadija and Aisha explain how being forced to repress important values and beliefs-in Mir's (2011, p. 554) terms, 'half-disavowal of identity'-can lead to self-recrimination. The exchange above echoes cognate studies (see Mythen 2012; Khan and Mythen 2019; Lems 2021; Shams 2020) and illustrates both the complexities and the accumulative cost of maintaining public equilibrium at the expense of muting cherished facets of culture, faith and identity. External pressure to perform a role that will be acceptable to the majority can be exasperating, as Zahra reflects:

Zahra: 'I was reading this article, about a Muslim guy. He made a really interesting point. He said he has to keep what he thinks about things like Palestine and Syria a secret because of what people might think. But when anything like the London attacks happen you're supposed to make a public show of how devastated you are. It's like you have to prove yourself all the time. How can one of those things be worse than the other?'

Zahra's comment is telling in relation to our earlier discussion of muting, in that it underscores some of the personal consequences of 'keeping secret' opinions and beliefs that may be perceived as politically provocative. Echoing cognate studies, several participants expressed the view that what they deemed as legitimate political views-for instance, opposition against Israeli State violence in Palestine-had to be suppressed in public, due to concerns about being seen as an extremist (see Awan and Zempi 2018; Shams 2020).

While the vignettes above reveal some of the pernicious micro-level impacts of Islamophobia, it is important to keep a grip on what they represent at a macro-structural level. Not only are these experiences located in 'contested spaces of identity' (Ajrouch 2004) at a deeper strata they reveal the wider implications and consequences of everyday systemic forms of racism (see Pérez 2017).

### *4.3. Imparting Islam: Ambassadorship*

In as much as cherry picking and strategic adaption enable opportunities for choice and reflexive decision making, the final two processes to be excavated—ambassadorship and active resistance—correspond with the cultural climate of Islamophobia in Britain and the processes of securitisation to which young Muslims in particular have been subjected to during their formative socialisation (see Mythen et al. 2013; Dunn and Hopkins 2016). In contrast to strategic adaption, a third approach to managing challenges in the public sphere discussed by participants was that of 'ambassadorship'. This refers to circumstances in which—rather than deflecting conflict—individuals felt compelled to attempt to educate strangers, acquaintances and work colleagues. It has been observed that the predominantly prescribed role for Muslims in the West post-9/11 was to act as ever-ready apologists for terrorism (Van Es 2019). Following attacks conducted by individuals sympathetic to radical Islamist philosophy across Europe and rising levels of hate crime, there is little to suggest significant improvements in overall attitudes towards Muslims since this time (see Awan and Zempi 2018; Allen 2020; Burnett 2016). Muslims in Britain remain negatively represented in the public sphere in relation to issues of faith, culture and national security (Meer and Modood 2019). In response to being positioned defensively, some participants in this study talked about how they actively sought to inform others about Islam. The pressure to challenge inaccurate accounts of Islam was most acutely felt in relation to the problem of terrorism, with several participants discussing circumstances in which they felt compelled to engage with non-Muslims to contest false accounts of their faith. In response to misrepresentations of Islam as an inherently violent religion, several participants cited instances in which they had felt duty bound to educate non-Muslims about their core values and principles. Often these instances in which Islam was ideationally attacked were connected to the implication that Muslims were 'less British' than non-Muslim Britons. In addition to rejecting the cultural construction of Muslims as 'enemies within', participants expressed irritation at demands to prove their 'Britishness' on demand by being subjected to various 'tests'. One frequently cited test was being challenged to condemn terrorist attacks conducted by individuals purporting to be motivated by radical Islam:

Hafsa: 'It's like when they uncover a terrorist plot or something, you feel you have to put on some sort of public display to show how shocked you are . . . make sure people understand that sort of indiscriminate killing is against Islam. It's almost like you have to apologise and express more shock because you're Muslim. I remember someone once asked me if I thought killing all those people on 9/11 was okay. I mean they really thought there was a possibility that I would say: "Yes. I think it was okay when they killed 2000 innocent people"'.

In a similar vein, Syed reveals how, as a British Muslim, he has been put under pressure to vocally condemn anti-Western terrorism in public circles:

Syed: 'It's as if you're somehow guilty if you don't show how outraged you are. You have to show that you're more upset than they are after every attack. Mourn like it was someone from your own family who was killed. If you don't, they'll tar you with the same brush. I mean, why should we? They don't give a damn about Muslims being killed, do they?'

Syed articulates his frustration at being associated with historical acts of violent extremism simply by virtue of his religious affiliation. In refusing to overtly and publicly condemn terrorist acts on demand, Syed fears being seen as a terrorist sympathiser. Aside from feeling interrogated about their views regarding acts of terrorism, our participants discussed the challenges of maintaining a strong sense of religious identity in conditions in which Islam is routinely undermined by non-Muslims (see Abbas 2019a; Kundnani 2015; Nabulsi 2017). Against this broader backdrop, Syed offered a personal account of his feelings of being held to account in school:

Syed: 'You know you are different right from being young. Having to explain things about you to other people. As soon as I got to school it started. You know, like "why do you wear them clothes? Why can't you sit in assemblies?" It's like Ramzaan [Ramadan]. At home it was just something normal that everybody you knew did. Something special you really looked forward to. Then suddenly you have to explain yourself. Your friends asking stupid questions like: "Why do you have to do it? What do mean you can't eat? Why can't you drink?" They try to make it sound a bit pointless, almost stupid, so it just spoils it for you'.

Syed's experiences show how young British Muslims are exposed to routine challenges of their religious beliefs, traditions and practices from an early age, fixed in a position of justification and explanation. Other participants recognised the implications of being questioned about Islam but accepted it as their Islamic duty to explain the principles of Islam. For Aisha, maturation as an adult was important in making the decision to adopt a more proactive approach towards educating others about the values of Islam, even in challenging situations:

Aisha: 'Yeah, it's changed, definitely. It's like the older I get, the more I've felt I should show people what's good about Islam, show people what Muslims are really like; that the negative way we're made out to be just isn't true. It's like you have to defend yourself, even when you haven't even done or said anything. It does my head in, because I feel like I'm constantly in the dock. But you've got to look at the bigger picture and try to defend Islam'.

Both positionality and the gaze of others influences notions of self and collective identity. Picking up on Aisha's thread, Hanna also talked about the demands of adopting a hands-on approach to enlightening others:

Hanna: 'I sometimes feel that I have to go out of my way to defend Islam, even to some of my white friends who I know pretty well. It's like having to prove yourself to people all the time that you're not some secret religious fanatic. I just do it. I think as Muslims it's really hard, but it's my religion, my family's religion and it is being hijacked by people who don't really understand it'.

As these testimonies indicate, in particular cultural contexts, young British Muslims may feel positioned in such a way as to feel duty bound to act as ambassadors for Islam. While on certain occasions, strategic adaption may be an appropriate response, at other

times the need to correct and inform supersedes. Hafsa, Aisha and Hanna all acknowledge the entrenched nature of Islamophobia underlying the interactions they describe. Yet, they nonetheless make a conscious decision to defend Islam and correct misperceptions of their faith. Despite being party to verbal abuse and discrimination, most participants remained positive about defending Islam when required, suggesting a commitment to advancing micro-level cultural change. Nevertheless, others felt aggrieved by the burden of societal demands to perform the role of the peaceful, benign Muslim. In many respects, Bhabha (1994) encapsulates these sentiments in his 'third space enunciation', exploring the potentialities of an ideational zone in which identities are subject to question and dialogue proselytises the working through of contradictions and ambivalences. Understood in this way, ambassadorship might be conceived as a form of enunciation that challenges binary constructions, underscoring the possibilities of plural expressions of Muslim identity. While this strikes a sanguine chord, it is important to avoid naivety about the corrective capacity of ambassadorship. Whilst some participants felt that their attempts to educate had produced lasting effects in terms of individual value changes, it remains the case that forms of stigma are institutionally embedded, wedded to processes of labelling and rooted in power relations.

### *4.4. Challenging Islamophobia: Active Resistance*

The final strand of identity management discussed here pertains to situations of conflict in which strategic adaption and/or ambassadorship were deemed unfeasible. Participants described various circumstances where conflict avoidance or reasoned debate was not appropriate or sufficient. When directly confronted with racist abuse, conflict was deemed to be inevitable, causing resentment and personal disquiet. While participants certainly felt 'at home' in Britain, they recounted many examples of occasions when some Britons were not at home with them. As others have noted, young British Muslims must not only combine, but also reconcile national, transnational and religious elements of their identities (see Khan and Mythen 2019; Shams 2020). As the narratives above testify, this reconciliation can partially be achieved through the deployment of strategic adaption or ambassadorship. However, such behavioural modes and ways of responding have less purchase in volatile situations where the Muslim self is directly threatened. In this regard, our findings partially echo Mir's (2011) observations of young American Muslim women who deploy 'loud identities'. Such identities are vocally Muslim, shunning the self-preservation techniques of strategic adaption and instead demanding the right to be respected. Participants in Mir's study were aware that in asserting their right to be conspicuously Muslim, they would have to face the stigma associated with the racialised and stigmatised "other" and the situational precariousness that may ensue. Of significance here is the situating and positioning capacity of the white gaze. As Smith et al. (2020, p. 4) posit: 'the white gaze entails not just a reading of a social object but also a rendering of that object; its authority is enacted precisely in the moment of perception, as the racialized body is made vulnerable to (its) scrutiny'. To this end, our participants recounted negative encounters in which punctures to their sense of 'Britishness' had occurred. Discussions regarding such punctures centred on two issues: objections to military interventions in Muslim countries and overt hostility experienced as a result of being Muslim. As other studies have reported, oppression of Muslims domestically and abroad, coupled with instances of institutional discrimination and a climate of Islamophobia have served to solidify Islamic aspects of identity for some British Muslims (see Mythen 2012; Jacobson 1997; Hamid 2018). Yet, the (re) assertion of Islamic pride for young British Muslims can also be tinged with anger and intermingles with internal ontological dynamics:

Syed: 'Well, I don't think about it normally. I never think, "Oh! I'm Asian." You know, someone says something, and there it is. Racism. It can happen anywhere, funny looks on the train, wondering why you didn't get that job, my sister telling me someone laughed at her, or she thinks they did. It gets you paranoid. You know that's it, if someone sniggers at my sister's hijab, it is past the point of explaining to them, it's time to get it on'.

In a divergent context, Muhammad-Ali also articulated similar sentiments of ire, in this instance pertaining to previous British military action in the Middle East:

Muhammad-Ali: 'The thing that totally does it for me is when they start bombing Muslim countries. Seriously, how many dead Muslim kids do they have to see before people say no! I mean for fuck's sake, it gets me so down, so angry. I can't think about it too much. That's the kind of thing that makes it really hard living here. You don't want to have anything to do with it, but you can't get away from Britain's role in it all. You can't. I don't want that sort of shit being done in my name. I don't want to be British in a way that means I sleep easy when they're bombing kids'.

Here, Muhammad-Ali discusses the complexities and conflicts of negotiating national and transnational elements of his identity, of being British Muslim while retaining global Muslim solidarities. His account, along with Zahra's insights about muting around Muslim global politics discussed in the previous section, echo a broader theme in the data. Participants understood their experiences as Muslims in the UK in relation to the oppression of Muslims globally, but were simultaneously acutely aware that conspicuous support for those groups exposes them as the Muslim 'other.' In this way, our findings support earlier studies (see Awan and Zempi 2018; Mir 2011). Of relevance is Shams' (2020) study which elucidates the transnational nature and reach of precariousness for Muslims. Based on ethnographic observation of young Californian Muslims, Shams asserts that the precariousness of one oppressed Muslim group subsumes national, ethnic and social borders to function as an additional layer of social insecurity for Muslims in America. Such transnational precariousness operates through discursive censorship and discrediting of Muslim political concerns and of those individuals who vocalise them. This exposure to precarity is articulated in the reflections of Muhammad-Ali above. He is clearly aware that protesting against British military oppression in Muslim countries outwardly destabilises his perceived 'Britishness', but challenges such a construction of national belonging, 'I don't want to be British in a way that means I sleep easy when they're bombing kids'. The transnational precarity resulting from the stigma of expressing global Muslim solidarities is particularly salient at this particular historical juncture in relation to the surge in conflict in Palestine and opposition to the military bombardment of Gaza by the Israeli State. While freedom of expression and the right to protest are enshrined in law in the UK under the Human Rights Act (1998), reports have surfaced indicating that young Muslims' expressing Palestinian solidarity have been silenced in schools and berated for being antisemitic, in some cases leading to disciplinary action (Parveen 2021; Prevent Watch 2021).

The micro- and macro-level examples raised by Muhammad-Ali and Syed drill deep into the stultifying nature of 'Britishness' tests alluded to earlier. The more Syed and Muhammad-Ali are exposed to experiences that fundamentally contradict their subject positions as British Muslims, the more they are forced to question their sense of national belonging and the seemingly incomplete nature of their citizenship rights. As Syed suggests, certain interactions regarding the boundaries between 'Britishness' and 'Muslimness' are beyond the parameters of reasoned debate and shift him into the territory of direct conflict. These experiences are illustrative of the power dynamics of the third space which is not always made up of 'equal parts', nor necessarily productive of harmonious relations (see Rutherford 1990). Rather, it is a space saturated by traces of historical power relations, where racism in Syed's case and military violence in Muhammad-Ali's case are considered beyond the pale. Processes of oppositional resistance indicate a fortified sense of identity and a deeper understanding of Islam amongst some younger Muslims, emerging partly as a response to intense questioning of their faith and culture by non-Muslims. While stigma functions as a form of structurally embedded power, the narratives and reflections of participants in this study indicate that collective mobilisation of forms of identity management can serve as a protective shield to resist being defined as 'other'. As practices of active resistance suggest, under certain conditions prejudice can be ideationally eschewed and collective identity fortified.

## 5. Conclusions

Our data illustrate some of the complexities of identity management as articulated by a group of young British Pakistani Muslims. As their reflections indicate, maintaining identity in liminal spaces involves negotiating borders and boundaries, reflexively exacting identity choices and flexibly adapting presentation of the self. As the experiential vignettes above show, the racialised production of space and place connects not only to 'allowable' expressions of identity, but, moreover, processes of belonging and exclusion. While macro-level theoretical sociological debates around the nature and meaning of racism progress (see Doane 2017; Shiao and Woody 2021) in this article we have sought to shine a light on specific micro-level effects on a particular group of young British Muslims. We have prioritised four prevalent processes of identity management recounted by participants, emphasising the mutable nature of these processes and the mixed fruits they yield. Indubitably, the cultural, social and political climate in the UK over the last two decades has impacted markedly on practices of identity building in general. We have argued here that the peculiarities and specificities of this context for young British Pakistani Muslims—including an entrenched climate of suspicion, securitisation and surveillance—have facilitated distinct and distinctive responses. These responses are inherently ambivalent, invoking modes of challenging Islamophobia and creating opportunities for the cultivation of hybridic identities (see also Mythen 2012; Herding 2014). Aside from the personal ramifications for our participants and their peers, our findings bring to the surface policy dilemmas. The abundant examples of hostility and abuse experienced by participants are disturbing and serve to underline the deep-seated nature of Islamophobia in Britain. Insofar as the findings related here may play a small role in influencing the contemporary intellectual agenda around Muslim identities, it is of paramount importance that institutional policies and practices are not only scrutinised, but, moreover, transformed in order to counter systemic racism and discrimination. The young people we spoke to had been subjected to episodes of discomfort across various social contexts in which they had been personally abused and/or in which their faith, culture and heritage had been besmirched. Given such a hostile climate, the ingenuity and resilience described in the narratives of participants is all the more remarkable. While institutional racism, misguided State policies and discourses which problematise Muslims must continue to be challenged, by dint of collective resourcefulness and personal durability, the young British Pakistani Muslims we spoke with had managed to positively construct and recursively recreate their identities. By valorising their cultural heritage and celebrating faith commitments, participants had developed semi-protective shields to deflect stigma and ward off some of the most egregious aspects of Islamophobia. As Modood (2018, p. 3) avers: 'by definition "othering" sees a minority in terms of how a dominant group negatively and stereotypically imagines that minority as something "other", as inferior or threatening, and to be excluded.' While dominant groups typically project their own fears and anxieties on to the minority, minorities, are never merely "projections" of dominant groups. Rather, as our data suggest, individual subjectivity and collective agency act as vehicles through which misperceptions can be challenged, exclusionary stereotypes rejected, and prideful identities asserted. Echoing Modood's observations, for participants in this study, episodes of discrimination and abuse were critical in the development of a palette of strategic responses. Far from being rendered powerless by forms of exclusion, agency was multiply mobilised to express a positive sense of 'Muslimness' from below and a firm attachment to dual-heritage identities. While much has historically been made in mainstream politics and the media of the supposed irreconcilability of British and Islamic identities, this supposition is roundly debunked by our data. Rather than feeling coerced into presenting as either 'British' or 'Muslim', our participants, expressed a strong commitment to hybridic identities, modifying accents according to context. In toto, this study endorses the view that identities are expressive of translocational subject positions, always in motion and perpetually reproducing mixity (Ghorashi 2017). For participants, the capacity to cross-culturally cherry pick was nourishing to the self and considered to be a valuable privilege. Conversely, the navigation of identities in the

third space is a process characterised by tension and struggle. Metaphorically inhabiting the third space must be distinguished from benignly perceiving it as a site at which the deep-rooted power structures of the past are dismantled to make space for culturally inclusive norms. The third space is not a free-floating zone untouched by meta-societal hegemonies. Rather, it arises from and is subject to the power configurations of society and bound by socially prescribed norms. Identities and emotions are ineluctably situated within discrete arrangements of power. Both strategic adaption and ambassadorship serve as manifestations of this. The examples of active resistance discussed demonstrate the potentially solidifying character of identities maintained under challenge. As we have argued, it is not so much despite, but moreover because of, the hostile climate faced by young British Muslims in contemporary Britain that the modes of identity management illuminated above have emerged and crystallised.

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